

Why Develop a Practice Model at This Time?

The DSHS Children's Administration (CA) has a huge externally-driven agenda which focuses on discrete changes in response to many identified gaps and problems in Washington's child welfare system.

- Governor's child safety mandates (24/72 hour response; 30 day visits)
- Child and Family Services Review / Program Improvement Plan
- Braam foster care lawsuit settlement agreement
- Child fatality review recommendations

While these initiatives set forward plans to improve our outcomes, they do not provide a comprehensive framework to support our clients in achieving the best outcomes. We must provide the tools and ongoing skill-building necessary for all social workers to effectively engage and work with families so they get better. The practice model will be the overarching framework to bring these pieces together with CA's other priorities.

Background

Throughout the summer and fall of 2005, CA staff and management identified what had to be done to build a strong and sound foundation to support and sustain improved outcomes for children and families. We charted a strategic course that would lead us to improvement in four key areas:

- Strong child welfare practice that protects children and works to strengthen families
- Strong array of services to meet clients' needs
- Strong, well-trained and supported workforce
- Strong business strategies.

Problem

We found that expectations for child welfare practice are primarily compliance driven. Structurally, there is very little attention paid to developing and supporting a qualitative approach to practice that helps the practitioner become ever more effective in his or her job. Instead, CA has multiple and complex policy and procedures notebooks which are difficult to follow. The interpretation and application of policies vary between offices and regions, which creates inconsistencies across the state.

Our families should be able to experience common approaches and a system that builds upon earlier work to the greatest extent possible. In the same way, a common clinical framework will enable us to better understand the previous work done on a case and give us the ability to build together—not start over each step of the way—when cases are transferred, workers move on, or a family relocates.

Approach

CA has assembled a team to develop and implement a comprehensive model for child welfare practice that blends the art and creativity of social work with the science of best practices and evidence-based programs.

The practice model team, and the work groups it will commission, will conduct a series of ongoing conversations and focus groups with staff and stakeholders, research other states' practices, and examine evidenced-based programs to identify the best skills, tools, and resources available. Their proposals will be developed, tested, and reviewed with staff, the management team, and a steering committee (that includes external partners) prior to implementation.

While all aspects of our work are being examined, we will not change things that are working well. Skill building will be an important focus of the design. The practice model team is examining seven areas:

- **Intake**—information collected, risk tags, wizards to help with decision-making for response time, screening, and alternative intervention.
- **Assessment, investigation, and case planning**—safety and risk assessment, safety plans, early engagement in services, standards for investigations, placement decision-making.
- **Front-loading service delivery**—engaging families, interventions, and motivational interviewing, evidence-based programs, case planning, community partnerships.
- **Permanency planning**—concurrent planning, reunification assessment, transition and safety planning, working with courts, parents, attorneys, CASAs, placement transitions.
- **Adolescents**—FRS population definition, service array, safety and risk assessments, education and well-being issues.
- **Placement resources**—relative search, assessment, and support, foster care licensing and training, group care and treatment foster care, promising programs and models, recruitment and retention.
- **Human resources and infrastructure**—staff and supervisor roles, skills and abilities, training, allotment methodology and budget building.

Our social workers care deeply about their work and work very hard at their jobs. They must have tools, skills, and support to do their jobs well. As an agency, we have not provided the ongoing training, support and coaching for continued skill development. Our risk assessment model can take years to learn to do well; other models are more structured and more easily taught to newly hired social workers. These are among the many things the practice model team will be considering.

Focus groups begin this summer. We need you to take an active role in reviewing, discussing, and providing your perspective on the issues raised by the practice model team.